



Tuesday, March 12, 2013 | [Advanced Search](#)

NationalJournal

LATEST AM EDITION

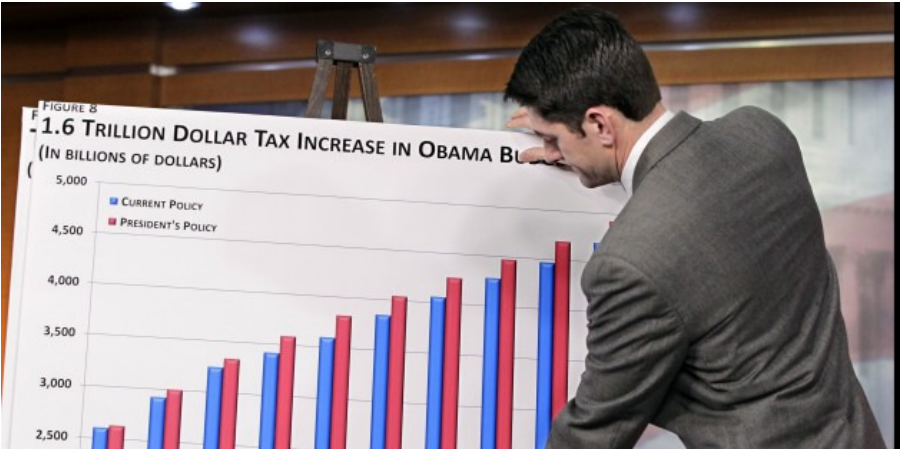
LATEST PM UPDATE

House GOP Confident on Paul Ryan's Medicare Plan

by [Alex Roarty](#)

Updated: March 11, 2013 | 10:36 p.m.

March 11, 2013 | 9:30 p.m.



Paul Ryan puts up a chart as he gives the GOP response to President Obama's budget submission for Fiscal Year 2012, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Feb. 14, 2011. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite,File)

Rep. Paul Ryan's plan to balance the federal budget in 10 years would have been, until recently, cause for House Republicans to fret. But emboldened by last year's elections, in which they say attacks on Ryan's previous proposals fizzled, the House GOP believes it can adopt the Budget Committee chairman's new proposal and avoid backlash at the same time.

There are limits to that confidence. Moderate Republicans scuttled a push for Ryan's Medicare overhaul to take effect earlier, something they say would have broken a promise that Americans now as young as 55 would still be able to enroll later in the traditional health care program. But that the Wisconsin congressman and his allies would even float such a proposal, one they could easily come back to, reflects a conviction they no longer should fear the politics of their fiscal conservative agenda. Their gamble might eventually amount to hubris; for now, Republicans say they're just confident.

"I think these guys think the majority is safe, and if they're ever going to do it, the time is now," said Brock McCleary, a former deputy political director at the National Republican Congressional Committee. "The push will be harder and will be even more aggressive."

There are two reasons behind the GOP's newfound belief: Republicans think they were successful defending the proposals last year, and they believe that, if anything, the new dynamics at play this year will help make their case.

Last year, House Democrats touted Ryan's budget, especially its plan to provide future Medicare beneficiaries a stipend to purchase private insurance, as their ticket to the majority. But Republicans rebutted the attacks with a combination of offense and defense. On one hand, they used the Affordable Care Act to criticize Democrats for cutting more than \$700 billion in Medicare spending—arguing that President Obama's party was the only one reducing spending on current Medicare beneficiaries. Many Republicans paired that attack with an ad, featuring their elderly mother or grandmother, pleading with voters that they would never reduce benefits for current seniors.

The group most susceptible to the Democrats' argument, seniors, broke overwhelmingly for the GOP: 56 percent of them backed Mitt Romney's candidacy. On Sunday, Ryan reiterated his contention that his budget had nothing to do with Romney's, or any other Republican's, defeat.

"We won the senior vote," he said during an interview on *Fox News Sunday*. "I did dozens of Medicare town-hall meetings in states like Florida, explaining how these are the best reforms to save the shrinking Medicare program and we are confident this is the way to go. It has bipartisan support. It's an idea that came from Democrats in the first place."

In 2014, Republicans are counting on a new wrinkle in this year's fight to help carry them. Unlike previous years in which Ryan released his budget, Senate Democrats are crafting their own spending plan. That sets up a point of contrast, and Republicans are confident that despite the spending cuts and entitlement reforms in their own budget, the fact that it balances out makes it a political winner.

"You know, Democrats talk an awful lot about 'balance,' " said House Speaker John Boehner at last week's press briefing. "So here's my question to them: Where is their plan to balance the budget?"

He added, "I think the American people support our efforts to balance the budget over the next 10 years. And I would challenge President Obama and Senate Democrats to embrace this common-sense reform and offer their own plan to balance our budget."

More than anything, House Republicans are just giddy at the opportunity to finally play offense on the budget. The aggressiveness they learned to harness last year can now be used to score points against the opposition, not just prevent points from being scored on them.

"We're going into a fight that you know you have the tools to win," said Andrea Bozek, a spokeswoman for the NRCC. "If you're going in with the mentality that you're going to be on offense for all four quarters, you feel better about going into it."

Of course, by November 2014, the GOP could regret its boldness. Democrats, for their part, welcome another fight over Medicare and Ryan's budget more generally, dismissing any declaration that the issue went bust for them last year. An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll from February found that 40 percent of adults trusted Democrats more than Republicans on Medicare; only 22 percent felt the opposite.

"The basic truth is any camp that is playing defense is not controlling the debate," said Michael Bocian, a Democratic pollster who works with the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "And they play defense on this issue because it's in our wheelhouse."